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# Iran-Saudi Rivalry in Africa: Implications for Regional Stability

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The ongoing reshuffle in the Middle East has generated new competition among regional powers, the resurgence of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry being a major one. It is sectarian (Sunni vs Shiite), ethnic (Arab vs Persian), ideological (U.S.-allied vs US-opposed), and geopolitical. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia present themselves as the leaders of both the Middle East and the Muslim world, and their competition has expanded to include Africa. This research paper offers an analysis of the role of Africa in the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, touching upon the strategic importance of the continent's untapped natural resources and location. It will also analyze the effect of the rivalry on alliance formation and stability in Africa.

## GEOPOLITICS

Geopolitics is often associated with zero-sum behavior and geopolitical expansionism. Traditionally defined as the interplay between geography and power in shaping international relations, the concept has expanded to include "the broader use of statecraft and state assets (geographic, economic, military, demographic, environmental and cultural) to gain influence in international affairs."[1] Geopolitical analysis also suggests that there are some areas or regions that form the "epicenter of geopolitical upheaval, with consequences that can extend far beyond their point of origin."[2]

Regional fragmentation, insecurity and violent conflict following the 2011 wave of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the subsequent competition for regional leadership have led to the revival of geopolitical thinking. Iran and Saudi Arabia have sought to take advantage of the ongoing regional fragmentation to raise their political profile by pursuing a larger agenda in MENA and beyond. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been leveraging regional disorder to perpetuate political stasis at home and abroad. Iran has so far been successful in tipping the regional balance of power in its favor, particularly since the Iraq War of 2003. Saudi Arabia has been concerned with the potential impact of regional reconfiguration on its domestic politics. The kingdom is primarily driven by a sense of vulnerability, focusing on ensuring security at home and continuity in the larger geopolitical setup.[3] Each country is trying to outmaneuver the other by taking the rivalry to Africa, a new arena of competition among regional powers. Thus, African states have been drawn into intra-Gulf and intra-Arab conflicts. For instance,

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the Qatar-GCC rift has triggered the withdrawal of peacekeepers from Eritrea and Djibouti, resulting in the re-emergence of their territorial disputes. After two decades of military and economic assistance from Iran, Sudan has sent troops to participate on the Saudi side against the Shia Houthis in Yemen supported by Iran. In short, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been developing ties with a number of African states on economic, security and ideological levels.

The Iran-Saudi competition is taking place during a unique stage of MENA's relations with international powers. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Washington has dictated the regional agenda in the Middle East. The United States has always played a role in preventing independent regional powers from gaining prominence, but the Obama administration began limiting the United States' security engagement in the Middle East. This new approach to regional affairs was met with great concern in "a region hard-wired for the exercise of American power."[4] The new U.S. role — exemplified by the Iran nuclear deal — made traditional U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel nervous about the perceived U.S. pivot to Iran. Saudi Arabia was obliged to carve out a geopolitical agenda independent from the United States. These developments demonstrate the beginning of a departure from the unipolar U.S.-led regional agenda to multipolar national interest-based agendas. To that end, Saudi Arabia successfully lobbied the Trump administration, which was eager to sell arms, appease Israeli interests and ensure an aggressive anti-Iran stance.

## BATTLES FOR LEADERSHIP

In order to understand the contemporary rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Africa, it is important to consider its historical roots. Despite the Sunni-Shiite difference, "the period after the formation of Saudi Arabia and before the Iranian revolution in 1979 was characterized by a degree of suspicion, but not overtly hostility."[5] The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran brought Islam to the forefront of the rivalry. The new Islamic republic challenged the main source of Saudi legitimacy, historically secured through Islam and the protection of its two holy sites. Iran also sought legitimacy from the Islamic world and embarked on a rhetorical campaign to discredit the Islamic legitimacy of Saudi Arabia. Fearing Iran's expansionist aspirations, Saudi Arabia provided financial support to Iraq in the Iraq-Iran War, deepening the tensions with Iran. The two have continue to manipulate sectarian divisions in various countries in the region in pursuit of their geostrategic ends.[6]

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran intensified after the onset of the Arab Spring, creating a power vacuum, altering regional power balances and exacerbating leadership competition. Iran and Saudi Arabia have sought to take advantage of the regional fragmentation to raise their political profiles by pursuing larger agendas in the MENA region and beyond. The Arab Spring and the rise of political Islam provided Iran with the opportunity to claim leadership of the Muslim world and end the Arab-Persian divide. Iran tried to provide an interpretation of the Arab Spring as a "delayed extension of the Iranian Revolution."[7] This interpretation would give Iran a prominent role, leading by example, and the rise of political Islam would neutralize the Arab-Persian divide. Saudi Arabia's main security concern is Iran's expanding its influence in the region. The kingdom accuses Iran of supporting terrorism and interfering in Arab countries;



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it considers Iran to be more of a major threat to regional security than Israel. Saudi Arabia sees itself "encircled by the Shia crescent stretching from Iran across Southern Iraq through Syria and into Southern Lebanon," in addition to being pressured by the unrest in Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.[8] Consequently, Saudi Arabia is trying to lead "an essentially Sunni and Arab alliance against Iranian inroads in Arab politics."[9]

The nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 group of world powers — the United States, UK, France, China and Russia plus Germany — promised to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting sanctions and freeing up tens of billions of dollars in oil revenue and frozen assets.[10] Since the nuclear deal, Iran has been pursuing a more assertive foreign policy aimed at challenging the influence of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia did not welcome the deal and publicly announced its doubts about Iran's intentions and compliance. Saudi Arabia perceives this deal as an enabler of Iran's ascendance to regional leadership. With the U.S. retrenchment and the nuclear agreement, Saudi Arabia feared abandonment by its main patron and was forced to take responsibility for its own security. Consequently, seeking allies has become a key security policy.

Currently, Iran and Saudi Arabia are on opposing sides of several regional conflicts: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Bahrain. Several events created the perception that Iran was behind unrest across the Middle East, particularly within Shiite communities. A newly hawkish Saudi Arabia has demonstrated its willingness to use military force to try to roll back Iran's influence in the Gulf. The Saudi-led Arab intervention in Yemen has brought GCC forces into direct conflict with the Iran-backed Houthi militia. The Iran-Saudi rivalry has created a vicious circle, in which "regional conflicts exacerbate the animosity and mistrust between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which in turn exacerbates the regional conflicts."[11]

## IN AFRICA

Historically, Africa has not been high on Iran's agenda. Under the Pahlavi regime (1925-79), Iran had no presence there, except for relations with Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the Moroccan monarchy and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. These relations were part of the pro-U.S. bloc against the Soviet Union. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran severed ties with the Apartheid regime in South Africa, a move appreciated by the African National Congress when it came to power in 1994.

Isolation was imposed on Iran during the recent decade as a consequence of its uranium enrichment program. Consequently, the Islamic Republic sought to expand its influence in Africa. Former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made significant efforts to expand Tehran's relations with African states. Those efforts were aimed at compensating for Iran's deteriorating ties with its traditional economic partners in Europe and in East Asia.[12] Iran has been trying to assert its influence in Africa through high-level bilateral meetings and a network of relations with many African states. Former President Ahmadinejad made more than six trips to countries in West Africa, gaining Iran observer status in the African Union. During his term in office (2005-13), Ahmadinejad exerted efforts to establish an Iranian presence in Africa in order to offset Saudi influence there and elsewhere and to promote a South-South strategy in both Africa and Latin America.



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Iran remained isolated until the JCPOA of 2015. Following the deal, Africa was not a top priority on Iran's agenda. The regime focused on taking advantage of the Western interest in Iran, which had managed to become, despite sanctions, the second-largest economy in MENA. Moreover, Iran ranks second in the world in natural-gas reserves and fourth in proven crude-oil reserves. It has well-developed processing and manufacturing capabilities, a strong industrial base, an educated workforce and a potential consumer market of over 77 million.[13] The new atmosphere of engagement between Iran and the West after the nuclear deal led to an increasing number of visits by Western political and trade delegations to Tehran and to mounting interest in opportunities to re-enter the Iranian market. Iran has experienced significant economic improvements since the signing of the deal. World Bank figures indicate that, following a growth-rate contraction of 1.3 percent in 2015, Iran's final year under sanctions, the Iranian economy witnessed a 13.4 percent growth rate in 2016, largely thanks to oil sales. While non-oil GDP growth was limited at 3.3 percent, it achieved its highest growth rate in five years.

Furthermore, scholars pointed to developments such as deals reached with Boeing and Airbus to supply planes and an increase of the country's exports to Europe of 344.8 percent and imports of 27.8 percent in 2016 as evidence of the JCPOA's economic benefits.[14] The deal also provided an opportunity for the United States and Iran to cooperate against the Islamic State (IS) and to work on issues of shared interest such as solving conflicts in Iraq and Syria. However, despite the hopes that the JCPOA would lead to a broader change in the relationship, progress has been limited. Trump's election and his administration's approach towards Iran have only created further challenges. The risk now is not only that the nuclear deal will not translate into a broader rapprochement, but that even the small achievements will unravel, leading to renewed tensions, especially after Trump's unilateral decision to exit from the JCPOA.

As attempts to improve its relations with the West risked reversal, Iran became active in Africa as an important region for soft- and hard-power projection. In October 2017, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif participated in the thirteenth Iran-South Africa Business Forum held in Pretoria. He discussed the expansion of economic and trade ties between the two countries and urged the South African government to resume banking relations with Iran. He asserted that "Iran and South Africa can make valuable efforts for international peace and stability as well as for developing countries' interests by cooperating at international fora." Likewise, in a meeting with his Sierra Leone counterpart in May 2017, Zarif stressed that Africa was of paramount significance for Iran in political, economic and cultural terms.[15]

Iran sought to gradually extend its influence deep inside Africa, relying upon various assets, strategies and alliances to further its interests. Iran exploited Shiite communities —approximately 5-10 percent of the African Muslim population — to spread its doctrine in African countries through scholarships, specialized educational institutes and cultural centers in order to breach the Saudi monopoly on Islam. In West Africa, Iran has been spreading Shiism through cultural, economic, diplomatic and media initiatives. There is a strong Shiite presence in Nigeria, 20 million of the total 92 million Muslims



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in Nigeria. This is a substantial number compared to the few Shiites in Nigeria at independence from Britain in 1960. This spread of Shiism despite Saudi largesse can be considered an Iranian success. The Islamic Movement of Nigeria, an Iranian-inspired Shiite extremist group, has created a newspaper, health clinics and a branch of Al Mustafa University based in Qom, the seat of religious leadership in Iran.[16] In Cameroon, where Muslims are a large minority, a Shiite presence loyal to Iran is beginning to emerge among Sufis in the north. They benefit from Iran's economic support, which has enabled them to build religious schools with the number of their followers growing every day.[17] The Shiite presence in West Africa outside Nigeria is estimated at about two million, and Shiite communities also have strong presence in Sudan. There is a Lebanese Shiite presence in Africa's west coast, and Indian Shiites in South Africa, as well as an Iranian presence on the Zanzibar coast.[18] In addition, Iran is exploiting the Sufis' love for the family of the prophet, through the Tidjaniya Sufi order, which has a long history throughout West Africa.[19]

However, Iran has been interested in Africa not just to spread Shiism, but also to break the international isolation and sanctions generated by its nuclear activities. Prior to the nuclear deal in 2015, the Horn of Africa had offered Iran an opportunity to develop relations. Similarly, states in the region tried to escaped sanctions imposed on them by welcoming relations with Iran. Iran and Sudan "established a cooperative military and intelligence-sharing relationship. Sudan became a major transshipment point for Iranian arms re-supply to partners in Gaza and Lebanon, primarily Hamas and Hezbollah."[20] Eritrea was also a key ally to Iran, allowing the Iranian navy to use its ports. Relations with Eritrea became a strategic asset, offering Iran "a foothold in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, as well as a strong naval position in Saudi Arabia's backyard."[21] Since 2015, Somalia provided Iran a gateway for smuggling arms and supplies to Houthi rebels fighting Saudi-backed Yemeni government.[22] The capacity to "challenge international commerce passing through the two strategic chokeholds in the region — the Bab al-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz — has been perceived as a principal strategic objective for Iranians, providing them with significant deterrent against outside pressure."[23] Access to Eritrea and Somalia, coupled with control of Yemen's Red Sea coast through the Houthis, enhanced Iran's ability to threaten international shipping in the Bab al-Mandeb. This ability was demonstrated when several attacks on U.S. and coalition vessels were launched from the Yemeni side of the Bab al-Mandeb in 2016.[24] Furthermore, the Iranian navy concluded a deal with Tanzania allowing it to conduct regular visits to its ports. Iran hopes that expanding ties with African countries would serve its naval expansion in the future.

Economic deals created new markets for Iranian products in Africa, especially oil, which was under global sanctions, and provided Iran with access to raw materials like uranium. Despite international sanctions, Zimbabwe signed a uranium agreement with Iran in 2011, and Iran managed to obtain more from Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Niger (the world's fourth-largest uranium producer). Iran earned billions of dollars from the implementation of joint projects, including facilities that refined Iranian oil. Poverty in the Sahel and West Africa provided opportunities for Iran, which implemented hundreds of economic



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projects and bilateral deals in countries like Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone, Benin, Nigeria and Ghana. Iran and Mali have a warm, if limited, relationship. When then-President Ahmadinejad visited Bamako and Timbuktu in 2010, he spoke of the solidarity between the two countries and signed a number of agreements on development aid and Iranian investment in agriculture and extractive industries.

Iran aims to fulfill another important regional ambition: establishing Hezbollah-style proxies throughout Africa. Iran sees "several African countries with weak state institutions and porous borders, as potential platforms from which Iran can threaten the wider region in the event of growing pressure in the Middle East."[25] Hezbollah already has a foothold in West Africa due to the presence of a large Lebanese diaspora. It uses the diamond and drug trade in order to fund and supply arms to the group in Lebanon. Another proxy is the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a Shiite religious and political organization headed by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaki. Iran has used the killing of 300 Shiites by the Nigerian government during a rally in December 2015 as an excuse to interfere in Nigerian domestic affairs. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has called for an investigation into the imprisonment of Zakzaki and the violence against Nigeria's Shiite community.[26]

Iran considers Algeria a vital "launching pad" into the African continent. The two resumed diplomatic relations in 2000, and Algeria supports Iran's nuclear program. The establishment of a production site for the Iranian car manufacturer Khodro in Algeria in 2016 underscores the strengthening of their ties. Moreover, Algeria displayed unwillingness to follow the Saudi lead in the ongoing events in the Middle East. Algeria is neutral in Saudi Arabia's dispute with Qatar, has refused to join the military coalition against the Houthis in Yemen and is not a member of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance.[27]

By building closer ties with African countries, Iran has hoped to gain their support in the United Nations and other international and regional platforms. Through cheap oil and gas exports, Iran ensures diplomatic assistance from African states in vital international bodies such as the UN Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran sought to strengthen ties with sub-Saharan African states to ease international pressures and sanctions. The head of the South African parliament was quoted to the effect that his country supports Iran's accession to BRICS — the association of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.[28] Iran also seeks to minimize the impact of new U.S. sanctions and to keep Iran's economy afloat, despite U.S. efforts to undo the nuclear deal.

In addition to political and diplomatic support, Iran looks to sub-Saharan Africa as a source of raw materials. Through bilateral relations with several states that possess uranium deposits, Iran has ensured supplies for its nuclear program. Iran managed to bypass international sanctions blocking its access to global uranium markets, by improving relations with Malawi and Namibia. In Namibia, Iran owns a 15 percent stake in the Rössing Uranium Mine, and Malawi is Africa's third-largest uranium producer.[29] In sub-Saharan Africa, the cornerstone of Iran's presence is South Africa. Their ties go back to the era of the Shah, when Iran was selling oil to the apartheid regime in violation of UN sanctions. Moreover, South Africa's telecom-



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munications giant MTN owns 49 percent of Irancell.[30]

Nevertheless, in June 2010, a few months after dozens of African countries attended the Iran-Africa Forum in Tehran, three temporary members of the UN Security Council —Gabon, Nigeria and Uganda — voted for international sanctions against Iran. In 2014, Sudan expelled an Iranian diplomat and shuttered cultural centers affiliated with the Iranian embassy in Khartoum and other cities on the grounds that they were promoting the Shiite doctrine in Sunni Sudan. In 2016, Sudan severed ties with Iran following its attack on the Saudi diplomatic mission in Tehran, which had been retaliation for Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shiite cleric, Nemr Al-Nemr, for terrorism. Somalia, Djibouti and Comoros have also severed relations with Iran.[31] After two decades of an alliance that enabled Sudan to survive on its military and economic assistance from oil-rich Iran, Sudan shifted its alliance and sent troops to participate in the Saudi-led Arab coalition against the Shiite Houthis in Yemen supported by Iran. Sudan's repositioning can be explained by its dire need for Gulf funds after the secession of oil-rich South Sudan in 2011.[32] South African President Jacob Zuma canceled a trip to Iran after an unannounced visit by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir on February 25, 2016. On March 27, Zuma made a state visit to Saudi Arabia, and several trade and investment agreements were signed between the two nations. South Africa announced that it would enhance cooperation with Saudi Arabia in fighting regional terrorist threats. Could the recent political and diplomatic posturing between South Africa and Saudi Arabia also suggest a new era in relations between the two countries? Could it change the South African position on Syria? South Africa had in the past abstained from voting for a UN Security Council resolution on Syria, claiming it was biased in favor of the opposition.[33] This shifting alignment indicates that Iran has largely failed to generate much depth in its Africa policy.

In sum, Iran's foreign policy objectives have been constant since the Islamic Revolution: promoting sectarian Shiite interests throughout the Islamic world, positioning Iran to displace Saudi Arabia as the world's pan-Islamic champion, and backing Third World populism to weaken U.S. and Western interests. Iran uses a number of strategies and tactics to advance its goals, prominent among them the use of proxies — most prominently Hezbollah. Iran has shipped weapons to Hamas in the Gaza Strip via Sudan. Iran used Hezbollah to arm and train insurgents in Nigeria. Hezbollah has been involved in suspicious activities in Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal. Proxies such as IMN are Iran's invaluable assets, enabling it to disrupt key Sunni states in West Africa. Iran uses charitable and educational organizations to advance its goals; for example, the Al-Mustafa International University is Iran's main tool for spreading Shiism. The university is based in the Iranian city of Qom and has branches in 50 countries. Al-Mustafa in Dakar, Senegal, receives 150 students a year and gives them free tuition, a stipend and breakfast. Graduates of Al-Mustafa repay this generosity by promoting Iran online or in books, while Iran claims to be promoting higher education in Africa.[34]

## SAUDI ARABIA IN AFRICA

Saudi Arabia's weight is based on its large hydrocarbon reserves and key geographical position, bolstered over the



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last decade by a surge in oil prices. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were the first to accept the Egyptian initiative in the 1970s to support Arab-African cooperation.[35] Moreover, the Arab Gulf states supported political Islamic groups in order to confront communism and increase their influence in Africa.[36] The Saudi and Gulf political and economic presence in Africa remains strong, especially in the Maghreb, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. African countries in need of Gulf investment give Saudi Arabia more clout than Iran in the continent. This is evident in Senegal and Gambia, which severed ties with Iran in 2006 when the Nigerian navy intercepted an Iranian vessel carrying weapons to Gambia.[37] Senegal has committed to sending hundreds of troops to the Decisive Storm military operation in Yemen under Saudi command.[38]

Concerned about the increased Iranian presence in Africa, King Salman of Saudi Arabia called for a Saudi-Africa summit in 2017 or 2018. This call was announced by Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir in a speech delivered at the African Summit in Addis Ababa in July 2017.[39] Saudi Arabia started to push Iranian influence back by pouring investments into the public and private sectors in West Africa and the Sahel. In addition, Saudi penetration extended into the religious realm, with a focus on the Maliki Muslims who compose the majority of the West African population. In Senegal, two miles away from a branch of Iran's Al-Mustafa University, the Islamic Preaching Association for Youth (APIJ) teaches Sunni Islam. The APIJ funnels cash from donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait to mosques run by Salafists — conservative Sunni Muslims who are sworn enemies of Iran. The APIJ's shelves are stacked with Salafist theology texts that imams use to preach in some 200 mosques across Senegal.[40] Moreover, Saudi Arabia seeks to combat the expansion of Iranian proxies in West Africa as well as limit Iran's ability to disrupt key Sunni states in the region. In Nigeria, Saudi Arabia attempts to limit the growth of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) by providing support to rival Sunni groups such as Izala, as well as doing little to condemn the actions of Boko Haram, a Sunni militant group, when it targets the IMN. Saudi Arabia also supports the Nigerian government in its efforts to suppress IMN. The IMN is considered a terrorist group and its events have been targeted by the Nigerian government. [41]

As it competes with Iran for influence in Africa, Saudi Arabia has gone beyond investing in economic and religious projects to contribute to the Joint Military Force of the Sahel. This force falls under the rubric of G5 Sahel, which brings together Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad for regional cooperation on political and security issues. Invited by France to bolster the finances of this force, Saudi Arabia committed $118 million.[42] This allows Saudi Arabia to claim leadership in the fight against global terrorism, as does the creation of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition of 40 Islamic states. This support for G5 Sahel is supposed to earn Saudi Arabia international legitimacy in the fight against terrorism — which Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of supporting — and to further its economic and political interests in West Africa. It also allows Saudi Arabia to plan for a long-term presence in the region, with an eye toward countering Iran.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Saudi Arabia has limited strategic goals, is motivated primarily by the need to counter Iran's



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influence and relies mainly on the promise of large investments. It has promised $20 million in cheap oil through the Saudi Fund for National Development to promote bilateral ties with Zambia and declared Tanzania to be a priority country for trade and investment, weeks after the Iranian Navy deal mentioned above. Saudi Arabia is said to have facilitated a deal between South Africa and Nigeria, in which South Africa's MTN made a sudden payment of $250 million toward what appears to be a fine of $3.9 billion imposed by Nigeria's NCC.[43]

Recognizing the threat to its interests if Iran were allowed to establish a foothold in the Horn of Africa, Saudi Arabia has invested heavily to counter Iranian influence. It has succeeded in Sudan. In 2014, Sudan expelled Iranian officials accused of spreading Shiite Islam through their cultural centers. At the same time, Sudan announced joining the coalition led by Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Consequently, Sudan received a $1 billion deposit in its central bank.[44] Saudi Arabia tried to overcome the international isolation imposed on Sudan by inviting its president, Omar al-Bashir, to attend the 2017 Arab-Islamic-U.S. summit in Riyadh. However, Al-Bashir decided not to attend, presumably as a result of U.S. pressure.[45] Saudi Arabia also promised Sudan and Somalia it would construct large dams in order to promote agriculture and the production of hydroelectric energy.[46] Saudi Arabia has also used economic power to strengthen ties with Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea, countries of strategic importance for the control of the Red Sea. Saudi involvement in the Horn of Africa allowed it to extend its "security belt." Saudi Arabia and the UAE established several military bases in the Horn of Africa, providing Saudi Arabia with a launching pad to counter Iranian influence. In January 2017, Saudi Arabia and Djibouti agreed on the construction of a military base in the East African state. The UAE has a new military installation in Somalia and a jointly operated base in Assab, Eritrea.[47] Beyond traditional security concerns, Saudi engagement in the Horn of Africa serves its interest in safeguarding access to food supplies. The kingdom has invested heavily in the purchase of land for agricultural production in East Africa. The Saudi Initiative for Agriculture Investment Abroad played a role in promoting deals with Sudan and Ethiopia, necessary to guarantee a reliable food supply.[48]

## AFRICA, THE BATTLEGROUND

Iran and Saudi Arabia are in a race to entrench their influence and strengthen and protect their interests. Their competition in Africa has intensified recently, reflecting three international developments: a more aggressive stance by the United States to challenge Iran's ambitions, an assertive Saudi foreign policy under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the Iranian efforts to become a competitive regional player through employing militias, proxies and solid bilateral relations to escape international pressure, taking advantage of the reopening of relations with western powers after the nuclear deal.

The Horn of Africa has emerged as the principal focus and a zero-sum power game for Saudi-Iranian competition. The Iranian navy's foothold in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden offered a strategic position in Saudi Arabia's backyard. Iran's access to Somalia provided a gateway for smuggling arms to the Houthis fighting against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government. Saudi Arabia invested heavily and managed to counter Iranian influence. In West



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Africa, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry played out primarily as a sectarian battle between Sunnis and Shiites. The two are supporting rival groups throughout the region in order to gain both ideological and strategic footholds. Two institutions, Al-Mustafa International University and APIJ, embody the contest for influence in Senegal, and more widely in Africa, between Iran-backed Shiites and Saudi-funded Sunnis. Each side is spending millions to win converts and political influence in a resource-rich continent. In sub-Saharan Africa, the rivalry is primarily waged through soft power policies and the promise of investments, particularly in the oil and gas fields.[49] Iran looks not only for political and diplomatic support, but also for raw material for its nuclear program.[50]

In this rivalry with Saudi Arabia for supremacy in Africa, Iran is facing serious limitations. Scholars speak of the dysfunctional diplomacy split Iran's diplomats and the powerful Revolutionary Guard.[51] Different government bureaucracies pursue their own goals, which are often in conflict with the foreign policy objectives of other institutions. Moreover, there is a clear disparity between Iran's ambitious foreign-policy goals in Africa and its ability to deliver on them. Iran's economic and soft-power outreach is in contrast with its opportunistic foreign policy, especially arms smuggling and extremist proxy activities. There is the deepened perception that Iran is using Africa merely to advance its interests. Diplomatically isolated and desperate for allies and assets, Iran tried to penetrate African countries, which now are deeply concerned about Iran's growing influence. Despite the fact that Iran's goals in Africa are not exclusively religious, there is concern about the ideological and religious sources of Iranian expansionism. However, scholars confirm that traditional Sufi brotherhoods prevalent in West Africa do not have much in common with the Shiism prevalent in Iran.[52]

Sudan helped Iran project its influence by serving as the key entry point for weapons exports to Africa. It has also been used by Iran for the transfer of weaponry to Hezbollah and Hamas. Struggling with a collapsing currency and soaring unemployment, however, Sudan has chosen to favor economic ties with Saudi Arabia over a relationship with Iran that was largely based on arms. The Sudanese government "decided to distance itself from the alliance with Iran after it evaluated the relationship and found it economically and politically damaging. Sudan discovered that relations with Iran have become a burden and that Iran did not offer any economic aid to Sudan."[53] This shift in alignment does not necessarily indicate that Saudi Arabia outdid Iran's influence in Africa. The kingdom faces economic pressures due to the collapse in oil prices, which might force Riyadh to scale back the use of checkbook diplomacy[54] Moreover, despite Saudi Arabia's generous investments and funding of Islamic projects in various African countries, 78 percent of African Muslims are Sufis, whose beliefs generally stand in contrast to a Saudi culture that features elements of Salafism.[55]

Despite the absence of real allies, Iran achieved a few of its objectives in Africa: an ideological foothold and sustained weapons transfers to proxies, as well as some commercial interests. As a rising power, Iran sees the necessity of building relationships globally. One can argue that Iran is currently facing major setbacks in Africa; however, the intensified Iranian-Saudi rivalry and the U.S. withdrawal from the JOPCA, as well as risks of renewed



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sanctions, might trigger another round of competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Africa. Skeptics argue that the nuclear deal did not alter Iran's geostrategic ambitions. Those ambitions emanate from the regime itself, rather than from Iran's nuclear program; the nuclear deal did not alter the nature of the Islamic Republic as "a radical expansionist and revisionist state." Others argue that Iran's foreign policy is purely a defensive response to an assertive Saudi foreign policy seeking Iran's containment and marginalization.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN SECURITY

Much of the Middle East's current dysfunction and bloodshed can be attributed to the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Who are the winners and losers of this competition and how will it impact the region's future? Saudi and Iranian attention to Africa can be considered a mixed blessing. The competition has meant financial and development support from the two rivals, but it has drawn African states into regional conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as intra-Gulf and intra-Arab conflicts. The Qatar-Saudi rift has triggered the withdrawal of Qatari peacekeepers from Eritrea and Djibouti, resulting in the re-emergence of their territorial disputes. The two sided with Saudi Arabia and downgraded relations with Qatar. As a result, Qatar withdrew several hundred peacekeepers from Eritrean-Djiboutian borders, where they have been deployed since 2010 to maintain a 2008 border agreement mediated by Qatar. Following the withdrawal, "Djibouti accused the Eritrean military of occupying territory in the contested Dumeira Mountains, ratcheting up tensions and drawing UN and African Union engagement."[56]

The greatest threat emanates from the export of different forms of conservative Islam to African states. Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to fund and construct mosques and centers of Islamic learning, leading to the spread of fundamentalist Shiism and Wahhabism. These fundamentalist ideologies, coupled with weak state institutions, are radicalizing populations.[57] Somalia is a prime example. In West Africa, a previously tolerant region, sectarian tensions are rising as Saudi Arabia and Iran export their views on Islam through schools, mosques and cultural centers. In Nigeria, a predominantly Sunni state, in which the extremist Boko Haram operates, the Shiite minority feels under threat. Iran, self-declared leader of the Shiites, justified interference in Nigeria's domestic affairs on the grounds that it is "the legitimate guarantor of the security of its fellow Shiites."[58] The vicious circle of growing religious intolerance starts with Iranian and Saudi funding and leads to rising Sunni-Shiite sectarianism, allowing the rivals to intervene in support of their respective sects. This has played out in Nigeria, Cameroon, Mauritania and Senegal in the form of ideological proxy conflicts. In 2016, problems between the Nigerian army and Shiite Muslims broke out after hundreds of Shiites attacked the convoy of an army chief. As the guardian of the Shiite branch of Islam, Iran was quick to condemn the reported killing of hundreds of Shiites. It also demanded the release of Shiite cleric Zakzaki, who had been taken into custody. The Nigerian government did not respond to this demand, seen as interference in its internal affairs. In a country bedeviled by a militant Islamic group (Boko Haram), a religious clash could be disastrous.[59]

In West Africa, Mali has raw memories of religious conflict. In 2012, an alliance



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of Tuareg separatists and Islamists linked to al-Qaeda invaded the country's northern half and imposed Sharia law before being ousted by French forces. However, a low-level insurgency has been rumbling on ever since. Militants have targeted the Malian army, UN peacekeepers, and foreign aid workers with drive-by shootings and roadside bombs. The extremist group Ansar Dine claimed responsibility for a deadly attack on a popular restaurant in Bamako in March 2015 and the killing of three soldiers in a village near the border with Mauritania in June 2015. Some argue that by funding schools, mosques and much-needed infrastructure, Saudi Arabia and Iran are creating divisions that previously did not exist. Mali provides a case study of how enmity between Sunni and Shiite Islam is being spread, via Iranian and Saudi proxies, to places thousands of miles from the Middle East. Through schools, mosques and cultural centers, Iran and Saudi Arabia are competing for African hearts and minds.[60]

On the other hand, a strong Saudi foothold in Africa and African solidarity with Saudi Arabia in its rivalry with Iran are linked to economic considerations. African states have benefitted from substantial financial investment from Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. Countries in the Horn of Africa are considering the economic importance of their diasporas in Saudi Arabia. A significant number of their nationals live and work in Saudi Arabia, and their countries are keen on protecting the interests of their citizens.[61] However, the escalating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have had a negative economic impact on Nigeria, Africa's top oil-producing country. The low oil prices since 2014 have negatively affected Nigeria's economy, as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries refused to cut down oil production and push prices back up.[62]

Major African countries do not want to be part of an Iranian-Saudi power struggle or to be drawn into Middle Eastern conflicts. Algeria and Nigeria denied that they have joined the military coalition in Yemen. Israel's attack on suspected Iranian weapons convoys in Sudan on October 24, 2012, is an example of how an African state can be drawn into Middle Eastern disputes. As Israel has been trying to interdict Iran's weapons shipments, Iran has been spreading its trafficking operations to Kenya and Tanzania.[63]

Conversely, some scholars argue that the Saudi-Iranian competition in Africa should be seen as an advantage for the continent. African states are responding to the competition individually as sovereign nations according to their national interests. Independent African nations are capable of engaging with Iran and Saudi Arabia "without succumbing to their influence of mortgaging national policy in exchange for financial assistance."[64] A report by the New Africa Institute argues that "individual African nations have their own idiosyncratic policy presumptions, calculi and means of leverage. Despite the obvious power asymmetries between some African states and some more powerful Middle Eastern states, a number of African states can, and do, leverage their location, resources and other national advantages to advance their interests."[65] Sudan's recent realignment toward Saudi Arabia can be seen in the light of its dire need for Gulf funds after it lost oil revenues due to the secession of South Sudan.[66] This repositioning toward Saudi Arabia is a "relationship of convenience."[67] In May 2018, Saudi Arabia discussed a deal with Sudan that would provide its energy needs for five years. This deal came



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after Sudan's defense minister told parliament that the government was reconsidering its military participation in Yemen, where Sudan has sent at least 3,000 ground troops to support the Saudi-led coalition.[68] Nigeria still enjoys political relations with Iran, but it realized the serious effects of the Iranian presence on its social fabric, security and stability and began to monitor Shiite groups and curtail their activities.[69] Moreover, given the nature of religious tolerance in Africa, a rise in sectarianism should not be a concern. Seventy-eight percent of African Muslims are Sufis, whose beliefs generally stand in contrast to Saudi Salafism and Iranian Shiism. West Africa has had a tolerant approach to religious differences, shunning — at least until recently — the sort of Sunni-Shiite rivalries that have plagued the Middle East in favor of a patchwork of beliefs that incorporate Sufism, Maliki Islam and traditional animist practices. [70]

## CONCLUSION

It is important to note that Iran and Saudi Arabia are not the only regional powers competing in Africa. Egypt is gradually trying to gain influence there. Strong ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia give Egypt the upper hand over its rivals Ethiopia and Sudan. Turkey exploits the concerns of some African countries about Iran's growing influence and intervention. Israel has relied on an international cooperation program to achieve its strategy of providing agricultural and cooperative planning assistance. Israel has also succeeded in building military relations with more than 25 African nations.[71] This competition will promote multipolarity in Africa by providing much-needed alternatives to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Competition for influence in Africa boosts the chances for African countries to achieve a balance among regional powers.

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